



# **THE SEVEN ROOTS OF HUMAN MISERIES IN THE PRESENT WORLD: HOW THE BUDDHIST DOCTRINES HELP**

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## **Abstract**

Human history is never in peace as we are always striving to be better than others. While the world's education is helping human to have better life, materials, finance and basic infrastructure, we are still fighting each other resulting in anguish and endless despairs. With all the success around us, we are supposed to be happy. Why is that irony? This is because the present-day education is still lacking some important teachings on some critical issues of our life. Buddhism has the main goal of ending human's suffering of all kinds or at least helps lessen the suffering so all of us can sustain life at comfortable level, materialistically and spiritually. The Buddha's teaching can fill the gap the world's formal education nowadays cannot reach.

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## **Introduction**

Buddhism is the religion of education and the Buddha's disciples called him and referred to him as the Teacher. Since the origin of religion over 2,500 years ago, the Buddhists have gained benefits, on both physical and mental reliance on the Buddha's teachings, especially Buddhist monks who have

learned Buddhadhamma by reciting the teachings and practicing the teaching according to their religious schools. Even if the Buddha's teachings aim towards the end of all sufferings by the way of meditation and deep thoughts, simple lay people still make use of the teachings to lessen their suffering at everyday life. The Buddha empathized the learning as it will lead to the religious goals. Religious scholars often referred to Buddhism as the religion of learning. The Buddha classified the three levels of learning this way: 1) Pariyatti-saddhamma: The laypeople study the text or scripture to gain understanding so they know the path to properly lead their life. 2) Patipatti-saddhamma: They practice what they have learned according to the Buddhist doctrine. 3) Pativedha-saddhamma: They can penetrate the wisdom from the Buddhist doctrine and end their sufferings in life (Payutto, 1985: 125).

While the education system in the world nowadays trains people to have professional skills, self-discipline and morality, there are many questions all educators cannot find the proper answers: Why are there still wars despite the fact that those initiated the wars are mostly highly educated? Why are there still starvation despite the fact that there is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone? Why are people living in despairs and want to die as we see the higher rate of suicide everywhere especially in those developed countries? All these problems lead to the fact that the worldly education at the present days may not be enough to prepare human to face the reality in life after finishing their schools.

Some statistics may elaborate the clearer pictures. During 1860-2018, there were 134 major wars happening around the globe (Scaruffi, 2018). Among 85 major wars during 1900-2021, the death toll was over 218 million (List of Wars, 2022). This figure excluded hundreds of small armed conflicts occurring around the world all the time.

Moreover, human do not only harm others, they also harm themselves, mostly from depression and unbearable suffering. Every year, over 703,000 take their own life while millions more are attempting it. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19 years old (World Health Organization, 2021). Surprisingly, people living in the developed countries seemed to have higher numbers in self-harm. South Korea, Japan, USA, Lithuania, Finland and Belgium are among the top on the list (World Bank, 2019). This indicated that the success in materialism and wealth may not answer all the human needs.



Are the world population happy? The World Happiness Report 2021 put the average score of the world's happiness, surveyed in 149 countries, at 5.2 out of 10 full score of the happiest. The happiest people are in Finland (7.8, ironically as the country's name is also on the list of high suicide) while Thailand (5.8) is above average. The least happy people are in Zimbabwe (3.1) (Helliwell, 2021: 18-19).

What is the wealth level of the world? The world is not that wealthy. In 2021, the estimated 698 million or 9% of the global population are living in extreme poverty, that is living on less than 1.90 USD a day. Over one-fifth or 1.8 billion of the global population live below 3.20 USD poverty line (Development Initiatives, 2021: 3). Ironically, more than 1.9 billion adults aged 18 years and older were overweight. Among these, over 650 million adults were obese. In general, 19% of the world's adult population were obese (World Health Organization, 2022).

Examples above have shown that the world is never in balance. There is either extreme poverty and extreme wealth in almost every corner of the globe. But humans are living with endless desires. Most of us are striving almost out of instinct that they need to gain more and more for themselves and their relatives. It is the exact what Indian philosopher Mahatma Gandhi once said "The world has enough for everyone's needs but not everyone's greed" (The Guardian, 2013).

Buddhism's main goal is to end all sufferings in our life. What the Buddha found under the Bodhi tree on the night of the enlightenment of Visakha Pucha's Day becomes the fundamental of the religion. It is the Four Noble Truths which are: 1) Dukkha - all beings experience pain and misery during their lifetime. Birth is pain, old age is pain, sickness is pain. Death, sorrow, grief and anxiety are pain. Contact with the unpleasant is pain. Separating from the pleasant is pain. Not getting what one wants is pain. In short, the five assemblies of mind and matter that are subject to attachment are pain. 2) Samudaya - the origin of pain and misery is due to a specific cause. It is the desire that leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and passion, seeking pleasure here and there; that is, the desire for pleasures, the desire for existence, the desire for non-existence. 3) Nirodha - The cessation of pain and misery can be achieved as follows: With the complete non-passion and cessation of this very desire, with its abandonment and renunciation, with its liberation and detachment from it. 4).

Magga - the method we must follow to stop pain and misery is that of the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Theravada, 2022).

It is reiterated that the Buddha will not teach other things else except the way to end all the sufferings. The Teacher once compared what he knows with the Simsapa leaves in the forest of Kosambi, that he knows a lot but brings to teach his disciples very little. "In the same way, monks, there are many more things that I have found out, but not revealed to you. What I have revealed to you is only a little. And why, monks, have I not revealed it? Because, monks, it is not related to the goal, it is not fundamental to the holy life, does not conduce to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, tranquility, higher knowledge, enlightenment or Nibbana. That is why I have not revealed it. And what, monks, have I revealed? What I have revealed is: This is Suffering, this is the Arising of Suffering, this is the Cessation of Suffering, and this is the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering..." (Simsapa Sutta, 2009). This can be summed up that the Teacher will only teach about suffering and the path to end the suffering.

## **The Buddha**

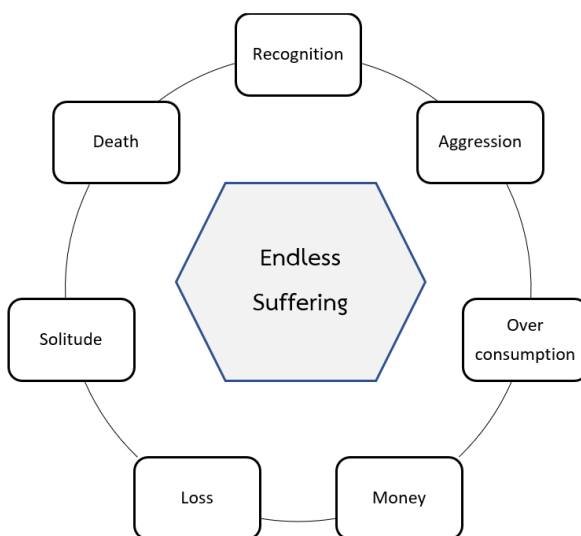
Siddhartha Gautama, the holy Teacher in Buddhism, was born in a royal clan on the foot of Himalaya. He was trained to be the king all his young life so he was given with sensual materialism inside his palace. When he came out of his palace for the first time and saw the human nature of old age, sickness, death and the ascetic, he decided to be a homeless seeking for enlightenment. After six years of hardship studying in several religious schools, he sought his own way until he reached enlightenment at the age 35. He taught *Dhamma* to his disciples for 45 years and died in a jungle of Kushinagar. Before his death, he talked to Ananda, his chief disciple that "... I am now old, worn out ... I have reached the term of life. I am turning eighty years of age. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathagata's body is kept going by being bandaged up ... Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, seeking no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge... Those monks who in my time or afterwards live thus, seeking an island and a refuge in themselves and in the Dhamma and nowhere else, these zealous ones are truly my monks



and will overcome the darkness” (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996, Vol.10, p. 110).

## Seven Important Issues that Trap Us All

We are suffering due to the endless desires we crave for something to happen to our life. People who cannot accept the changes or the loss in life will suffer the most. By nature, human would cling to something dear to our heart and keep it in our memory. At the same time, they would detest the things they do not like and they would not hind away from their memory either. This paper has analyzed some important issues in our life that bring suffering to most of us. We might be taught in schools to deal with personal problems later in our life but it is not that effective; otherwise, all of us would live without suffering for the entire life. Some issues are not taught in schools at all because it deals too deep with the heart and only religious belief can bring solutions to that particular problem. Those seven important issues are summarized into the following diagram:



### Recognition

It is easily seen in our life nowadays that we are seeking recognition from friends, family and even the public through all social media. We want to be recognized as a successful person with good look and all the talents we can

show to the world. The 'self' or 'ego' has played the most important part in this endless recognition seeking and it happens at daily basis. We are obsessed with the 'self' and we suffer when our 'self' is not recognized by the public. We take a lot of photos just to select the best one to show on our social media. That best one usually represents the prettiest, the youngest, the richest or the thinnest depending on our taste in that society that we want to send the message to. Clinging to 'self' brings suffering to ourselves. Buddhism taught us to be aware of 'self'. A parable about a traveler may explain it all about 'self'.

In a middle of the way, a traveler knocked on a door and asked the house owner to give him a night stay. In the morning, he shouted to everyone that this house is his. Everyone thought he must be mad because he was just a traveler for only a night's stay. Same to our life, we have this body and at the end, we will let it go by nature. Still, everyone clings to this body that it is their 'self'. The given name is their name. All wealth they acquired in life are theirs. And we suffer a great deal by this 'belief' that everything belongs to us and that we think 'self' exists in our life. Those who understands Buddhism in this 'self' issue will have less suffering. They might not need to seek a brand-new expensive car or the big house in order to get recognition or acceptance from the public. We may have material things just to serve the necessity to sustain life, but not for the show.

## **Aggression**

As we have seen on the news every day, a sudden burst of anger caused crimes on the road, in a good family, in the nice office and even in a peaceful temple. The Buddha called the three fires as lust (raga), anger (dosa) and delusion (moha). These are burning on our head all the time and they caused suffering in our life. When a country's leader is angry, he or she may cause a lot of deaths and sufferings to another country. And the world is never without wars out of someone's anger. Human are harming other human all the time throughout our history. Why is that? It is because we are aggressive and we want to compete and compare to others all the time. We are angry because we believed 'self' exists in our life. We want to be superior and we showed anger, the emotion that we never learned to control. The Buddha taught us to be mindful in our body, speech and mind all the time. Do not act without mindfulness. Practicing meditation just only a short period of time every day will increase the power of mindfulness. So, we can stop our emotion before it



bursts out in time and hurt other people. Most of the time, we regret our wrong actions especially from the sudden burst of anger and because we know that we are supposed to restrain our actions with mindfulness.

## **Overconsumption**

There are more people dying of obesity than the malnutrition nowadays. Around two billion people are overweight and it becomes a hot issue in many countries around the globe. It was calculated that around four million deaths each year were caused by the excess body fat (Delgado, 2019). The Buddha himself promoted the one meal consumption each day for all monks. Normally, monks will recite the prayer before they eat and that they will eat just enough to sustain the body so they can perform skillful actions each day. The prayer said they should not eat for enjoyment or muscle buildup. Monks cannot eat solid food after noon and they show moderation in all things including eating. For the lay people, if we choose to eat just enough to sustain the body each day, with enough nutrition, we can keep the good shape and health. For those who are overweight, we can adopt this Buddhist concept and learn to eat with moderation, not too full and not too light.

## **Money**

Money is the only thing in the world that defies all the differences of nations and religions. Most human are suffering because they think they do not have enough to feed their endless desires. The 'enough' amount of the money in the bank is never the same for all of us. People can kill themselves while they still have millions in the bank and they thought they are poor. The Buddha taught us to divide our income into four parts (Bhogavibhaga). One part he should live and do his duties towards others. With two parts, he should expand his business. He should save the fourth for a rainy day (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996, Vol. 11, p. 212). If all of us adapt this teaching to our life, there will be less financial problems and that we know how to manage the wealth in appropriate way.

The Buddha also taught that lay people should try to possess these house-life happiness (Gihisukha). 1) Atthisukha: the bliss of ownership or the pleasure of having adequate wealth that they gained by ethical means. 2) Bhogasukha: the bliss of enjoyment or the pleasure that they spend money to

feed their loved ones and help others. 3) Ananasukha: the bliss of debtlessness or the feeling that they are independent from others. 4) Anavajjasukha: the bliss of blamelessness or the good feeling that they perform skillful actions on body, speech and mind. Among the four qualities, the last one was praised the most by the Buddha (Payutto, 1985, pp. 173-174)

## **Loss**

In our life time, we cannot avoid the loss. From time to time, we will experience the loss of our loved ones, the pets, positions, belongings, health and even our wealth. The question is how well we can receive those loss with wisdom and calmness. We are calm because we understand the true nature of life, that everything is impermanent. The Buddha taught us to understand the three natures of all things (Tilakkhana). The first is Aniccata that everything is impermanent. The second is Dukkata that all things are under the state of suffering. It keeps changing form or decays. The third is Anattata that all things are not-self (Payutto, 1985, p. 104). There is nothing worth clinging to because there is no 'self' to hold to. The knowledge of these three characteristics will make us aware that the loss is imminent in our life. We cannot live without it. The Buddha also taught us the true nature of things of these four pairs (Lokadhamma): the gain and the loss; the fame and the obscurity; the praise and the blame; the happiness and the pain. We all will experience these eight natures and we cannot choose to receive only the positive sides. The people who lost their wealth or position are living in despair. The more their cling to it, the more suffering they will put themselves into. Understand the true nature of things will lessen our suffering and it may help us repair our broken heart in a better way.

## **Solitude**

It is impossible in our life time that we can stay with other people all the time. There must be times when we have to stay alone and have to deal with loneliness. How can we deal with solitude at sometimes in our life? Those who cannot stay alone will suffer a great deal with their self-inflicted suffering. All parents want their children to live independently one day and can stand on their own feet as they know that they will grow old and leave the world. The children should have their own life, start their own family and live forth. Loneliness is like a disease that is eating up our energy and makes us lose focus. Many people complained that they lack focus and that they cannot achieve their goals because





of this loneliness. This is because they lack appropriate techniques to deal with loneliness. To deal with solitude, the Buddha taught us to meditate with various types of meditation techniques. One easy way is to be mindful to our in-and-out breath. By being watchful to our breaths for 10 minutes a day, scientists found the person can slow aging and solve problems of anxiety, restlessness and even some diseases. A study at University of Waterloo, Canada, found that a short meditation each day can help people with stress and depression (Daily mail, 2017). So, next time when you have to stay alone in your house, try a 10-minute sitting meditation before doing other activities and you will realize your own internal power.

## **Death**

The topic of death may sound as a taboo to many cultures but the fact is that simple: we cannot avoid it. Everyone dies sooner or later. And death brings suffering and despairs for those who cannot accept the loss of their loved ones. The Buddha himself realized his own death and gave the warning to all of us. “All lives, children, adult, stupid, smart, rich, and poor will all die. All creatures are like the clay pot; either small, big, ripe or raw will one day break. My age is now ripened. My time is little. I will leave you very soon. I’ve reached my own refuge. You all should not be careless, keep your mindfulness, purify your morality, have right intention, and restrain your mind. The ones who are not careless in this Order will leave rebirth, and decay, reaching the end of suffering” (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996, Vol.10, p.131-132) The Buddha taught us to remind ourselves every day that we might die anytime and any day. So, we should strive to achieve our life goals before we do not have opportunity. For those who find it difficult to accept death, should be reminded of the true nature of all things, that all eventually comes to an end. We are born, decay and die at natural course. There is no exception. We should accept it as it naturally is.

## **Conclusions**

While we are striving to achieve success in material forms, we end up suffering ourselves from various causes. This is because we do not know how to deal with some critical issues in life. For example, we seek recognition from the public in our social media by increasing our ‘self’ to the limit that we suffer when we are not recognized. We do not know how to control our anger. We also

suffer from the mismanagement of our income. All these are taught very little or not at all from our worldly schools. Buddhism has offered the solutions to all these problems in order to lessen or end the human suffering. Before the Buddha died, he said these last words: “Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation” (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 1996, Vol.10, p.166). Whatever the life’s goals that we all have, try hard to achieve it before our life ends. If we are seeking the path to end all suffering in life, Buddhism also has an answer for everyone.



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